

Addiction and Recovery in the 2016 political arena

The issue of addiction has been addressed by many of the presidential candidates of both parties. Their positions clearly have been formed by personal experience of family and close friends, as well as by advocacy organizations and available research. Yet seldom does the impact of alcoholism and drug addiction on the family get much attention, despite the clear evidence that alcohol and drug use and dependence have a major negative influence on the lives of family members, both acutely and chronically, from family disruption to life-long risks to dependence as well as a myriad of other health and social problems. In addition, there has been little focus on recovery from addiction and its impact on the family.

Background

The family members of persons dependent on alcohol and drugs are greatly impacted, especially the 18.25 million children under 18 (1 in 4) living with alcohol or drug addicted family members, not only in the short term, while the trauma manifests itself most acutely, but also in the long term, as family relationships are damaged and, in particular, children are harmed in many ways, including their mental and physical health, with dimmed prospects for an emotionally healthy life. There is considerable research to validate this impact, which is all too often characterized by severe and sustained disruption to the well-being of the family, often including economic distress, school failure, legal issues, social stigma, and emotional problems. Many of these impacted children also suffer great pain and anxiety because they cannot live with the addicted parent due to that person being in prison, institutionalized, or has lost parental rights. Further, family members need to be involved in treatment and recovery decisions, and must be available and supportive to the dependent person who in recovery requires a stable and supportive emotional and spiritual environment to ensure a lifetime of remaining drug free and once again becoming a productive member of the community.

As important as treatment and recovery are to the person with the alcohol or drug problem, without attention to the impact on the family and their role in recovery, the chances of long-term recovery are less likely, and the harm may well continue for another generation. Thus, although expansion of treatment quality and availability is essential, without involving the family, we as a society are much less likely to curtail the multi-generational harm done by alcohol and drug addiction.

The serious and growing threat of drug and alcohol availability

The increasing levels of addiction and fatalities from many readily available addictive substances, from opioids and alcohol to new formulations such as *flakka* and *kratom*, require a comprehensive approach, to involve prevention, early intervention, treatment, drug courts, and recovery support services. With trends in new drug products and drug delivery mechanisms

(such as e-cigarettes converted to marijuana) growing the threat, we must conceptualize an approach that involves improved public policies, expanded intervention and treatment availability, support for individual and family recovery, and a reduction of the stigma that accompanies addiction.

The Role of Families

Families play a key role in all of these approaches, from preventing early onset of use through strong parental roles, attentiveness to adolescent behavior changes, seeking early intervention when needed, supporting a loved one in the decision to seek and undergo treatment, and maintaining that support during recovery by providing a stable, emotionally safe social and physical environment in the home and the community.

We know that only a small percentage of those who need treatment for addiction actually get into treatment, largely because they do not perceive a need for it. Family members have enormous opportunity — and responsibility — to recognize, intervene, and support the decision to enter treatment. And then follow through with support during recovery. There is no more powerful influence.

In some situations family members may be in a unique position to administer life-saving interventions, such as the use of naloxone, an overdose reversal medication, and get the affected person to medical services such as an emergency room.

Yet families of people with alcohol and drug addiction themselves need support during the process of treatment and recovery. Children in particular suffer from addiction in the family. The family problems resulting from drug and alcohol addiction are well known, and the research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE Study) reveals that certain parental behaviors, including child abuse and neglect, violence, separation and divorce, and alcohol problems increase the likelihood that those children will develop a wide range of social and health problems, including early onset of drinking or drug use and, over time, alcohol or drug dependence.

The dramatic and heart-breaking impact on families translates to enormous social costs in areas such as school failure and juvenile justice. Improved efforts to break the intergenerational transmission of addiction are essential, as we have more than 73 million youth ages zero to 17.

The Role of the Recovery Community and Peer-based Recovery Support Services

Individuals in recovery from addictions are coming together to help more people find recovery by providing peer-based recovery support services such as recovery community centers, recovery coaching, and telephone-based recovery support services. They are demonstrating that over 23 million Americans from all walks of life have found recovery and that long-term recovery is a reality and a process that takes time and support. The organized recovery community is building the capacity of recovery community organizations (RCO's) to thrive and participate in local, state and national policy arenas and deliver peer recovery support services. As a recovery advocacy movement individuals and families are committed to working with our policy makers at every level of government to eliminate the stigma and the discrimination that keep families from seeking recovery or moving on to better lives once they achieve it.

What should progressive drug policy look like?

A number of key components should comprise a sound national policy to address the problem of alcohol and drug addiction. The basic elements should include:

- Laws and policies that enable meaningful and continuing participation of family members in the recovery, health, wellness and civic engagement of people affected by alcohol and other drugs..
- Communities that are organized and mobilized to address negative public perceptions of addiction and to eliminate barriers to universal quality, effective care and supports to achieve long-term recovery, health, wellness and civic engagement.

Call to Action - 5 Questions to Candidates

Questions to ask candidates about key recovery issues, including the role of the family:

1. An estimated 22.7 million Americans (8.6 percent) need treatment for a problem related to drugs or alcohol. Untreated addiction, and the accompanying negative stigma, often leads to other problems and illnesses such as heart disease, lower work productivity, overcrowded jails, family disruption, and developmental damage to the addicted person's young children. Yet, there continues to be a large "treatment gap" with only 2.5 million people (0.9 percent) receiving treatment at a specialty facility.

If elected, what actions will you take to address the stigma surrounding addiction, and increase access to addiction treatment and recovery services for all who need them?

2. It has been proven that, despite spending billions per year on the "war on drugs", overall drug use has not decreased. With an explosion in prison populations, continued substance use in vulnerable populations, and a spike in opioid use and overdoses, the electorate is pushing for a new approach that puts an emphasis on reducing demand for drugs and alcohol through alternatives to jail such as treatment and recovery support services.

Do you agree with this new approach and, if so, why? And how will you support treating addiction comprehensively as a public health issue and not a criminal justice issue? Do you support drug courts as an alternative to incarceration? Do you acknowledge the key role of the family in treatment and recovery services? How will you support that role?

3. Many in long-term recovery have experienced insurance discrimination, having been denied any form of continued care that would help manage and treat their chronic illness. While the Affordable Care Act and past parity legislation has lessened this problem, discrimination remains prevalent in the insurance market.

What would you do to ensure compliance with the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act? Do you support transparency from insurance providers about addiction treatment?

4. Many people who are in jails and prisons also have drug and alcohol problems. Many don't receive any treatment for their addiction while incarcerated or after they return to their families

and community, despite the fact that effective treatment and community-based recovery reduces recidivism and keeps people out of costly jails and prisons,

Do you support increasing access to treatment and recovery support services for people who are or have recently been incarcerated? And how would you do that? Do you agree with providing affordable treatment and recovery support as an alternative to incarceration for non-violent offenders and recovery support for their family members where possible, including their children?

5. Millions of individuals in long term recovery from addiction have been convicted of low level drug offenses, making it difficult to receive education services, find employment, and access housing. Too often this strain can lead to relapses back into active addiction, and families and communities suffer the emotional, social and economic costs.

How would you support criminal justice reform in this area and lowering barriers to reintegrate into society?

Our Request of Candidates

We urge you, whether or not you are elected President, to fight for these critical measures. Over 23 million Americans are in long-term recovery, while 22 million more continue to face the struggle of addiction. By treating addiction as a public health crisis rather than a criminal justice issue, we can create a long-lasting hope for not only breaking the cycle of addiction, but also for eliminating the transmission of the disease to the next generation, with its severe and often lifelong impact on family members, especially children. There is a solution to this public health crisis. Addiction to alcohol and other drugs is like many other chronic diseases - chronic, primary, progressive, fatal if untreated, and genetically predisposed, with a substantial health, social and economic impact on families. We must treat it in such a manner all the way from prevention, intervention, treatment, and ongoing recovery support.

The continued prevalence of Substance Use Disorders is costly to our nation. The failure to treat addiction as a comprehensive health issue has caused a host of other problems and illnesses- heart disease, lower work productivity, overcrowded jails, social costs, and broken families. Access to recovery support services should be readily available to all Americans including impacted family members, and families should be supported as a vital component of recovery.

We ask candidates to:

- Ensure coverage for equitable and effective prevention (including preventive interventions for the impacted children of addicted persons), treatment and recovery care in all public and private health care plans.
- Treat addiction as a public health issue throughout our public systems, in the same way we treat other chronic health issues.
- Fund addiction prevention and early intervention in health care settings, workplaces and schools (including re-instituting the proven effective Student Assistance Programs in all schools to assist students to succeed in spite of adverse situations impacting their lives) – to stop crises before they begin.

- Support long term recovery and relapse-prevention by ensuring adequate funding and resources for family- and community- based recovery support services.
- End the criminalization of addiction, eliminate reintegration barriers for people convicted of low level drug offenses, and support family recovery for the purpose of family reintegration and healing.
- Support funding for research, technology, and models of care that will continue to improve outcomes for individuals and families.
- Prohibit discrimination against people in long-term recovery and their families through eliminating barriers to education, gainful employment, safe housing, and health insurance.
- Support drug courts that include family recovery programs together with offender treatment, to optimize conditions for successful outcomes for the individual, the family, and the community.
- Promote the economic benefits of sound policies and programs that support treatment and recovery, as well as the reduction of the pain and suffering of those with addiction, their families, friends, and communities. With 1 in 4 children living in a home with this disease, a more humane treatment and recovery support system can reduce the social and economic costs of child abuse, broken families, school failure, courts and corrections, and medical and mental health costs.

Faces & Voices of Recovery has been the Voice of those in recovery, and those struggling to be, since the inception of the modern recovery advocacy movement. For the past 33 years, NACoA has been the Voice for the impacted children and families working to break the generational transmission of addiction that has plagued our nation for decades. The costs to millions of developing children who suffer in silence and fear, reaping lifetime mental, social and physical consequences that spill into the health care system, the juvenile justice system, our schools, social services and our foster care systems, are still incalculable. Yet, they are devastating families, impacting the brain and emotional development of children and draining the human and financial resources of our country.

We believe that, while we must address current drug addiction issues and provide, in the present, the treatment and recovery support needed by those with this disease, the plague of addiction will continue to the next generation if we do not also provide the recovery support programs needed to save the children from the adverse impact of a loved one's disease. We know what to do, but we need compelling national leadership to include saving the lives of individuals and their family members as part of any plan to address addiction. With enlightened leadership, whole families can recover and heal. We are counting on you for that leadership and would be happy to help you in such efforts.



Patty McCarthy Metcalf
Executive Director
Faces & Voices of Recovery
www.facesandvoicesofrecovery.org



Sis Wenger
President & CEO
National Association for Children of Alcoholics
www.nacoa.org